

Some Newspaper Hoaxes

By HUGH PENDEXTER



THEY that handle the pen of the writer dream strange dreams. Possibly nowhere is this fact so markedly accentuated as in this country. Before the printing-press was discovered and could be utilized in belaboring the first city governments for defective plumbing, the minstrels and other liars earned their wage by dallying with fiction. The primal impress has remained to this day, with all its eternal clamor for something new, something abnormal, not only in life and acknowledged fiction, but also in news items. And the result is a yearly output of thought-germs that would bring the blush of envy to Mr. Münchhausen's strained brow, could that dilettante be with us for just one edition.

This desire for the unusual, and life in general are responsible for the eccentric creations of the space-filler. The writer is merely an agency set in motion by the all-compelling demand of the reading public. First, incessant desire commands, and he looks wildly about to obey; second, life fails to supply the timber, and he levies on his imagination. And the public sighs in content, and is filled, and the good "story," using the word in the newspaper significance, is easily swallowed.

Conception of the Fake

ONCE decided that a hoax is imperative, the average inventor will aim only at an item both harmless and interesting. It must be entirely lacking in mischief, with few possibilities of a come-back, and yet be of a fascinating fiber that will surely grip and clinch the attention. With this prudent and charitable object in view, the wise owl will seek to base his yarn on some commonplace article or situation, whose part in the episode, of itself, can be easily appreciated by all.

A case in point is a story printed in a Western New York paper four years ago, describing how a farmer, while cradling oats, fell on the point of his scythe and punctured his jugular vein; and how a passing wheelman bounded over the wall, whipped out his tire tape and glue, injected the latter, stuck on a generous quantity of the former, and the agrarian survived.

The story was modestly written, even bore the faint earmarks of being afraid; yet as the different press services pounced upon it and embellished it, some describing how the tire tube was inserted to mend, or splice, the vein, some even reproducing the likeness of the injured man, the heaped-up climax well near staggered the author. From coast to coast, from zone to zone, physicians and surgeons, medical societies and savants, wrote in, some jokingly asking what there was to it, some honestly requesting all the details, until the poor originator cursed it all as a thankless Frankenstein. A week ago the mail disgorged a travel-stained epistle, sent out from a small post up near the lower waters of Hudson Bay. The writer, a physician, had just stumbled on the item in an English sheet and desired more complete information. It has never been demonstrated that a jugular vein cannot be mended with a bit of glue and a piece of tape; and if members of the medical profession would pause to examine the item, what chance had the average layman to discern the boundary line between crude truths and nimble fancies?

A Crow and Some Dynamite

IN the country it is especially true that to read of an incident in the daily press is equivalent to having been an eye-witness. It is nerve-tingling to learn that Jabe Whitten's homestead and life have been rendered uncertain of continuity by a flock of vagabond crows flying back and forth over the roof-tree, sporting with a purloined stick of dynamite. A whole county in New York State was thrown into a furor of excitement because of this story a few years since, and the situation became so acute that the appearance on the horizon of anything wearing feathers was the signal for the tac-tac of the rifle and the rumble of the shot-gun. When the same



county learned that a yellow cur, one of a hungry pack, had bolted a generous portion of dynamite while trying to steal a miner's dinner in the gypsum works, and the people were sorrowfully warned to treat all strange dogs gently and with gloves, as it was not known which one contained the high explosive, the "Hound of the Baskervilles" became an inoffensive nursery ornament in comparison, and the pups led a gay and care-free life.

But the readers were becoming irritated, and when another ambitious painter of the lily explained in detail how two croquet champions were to meet and decide the supremacy by using wickets made of "crystallized" nitroglycerin, public opinion cried aloud to high heaven and the board of supervisors to rigidly enforce the law relative to the sale and use of explosives. It only needed a weak imitator's thrilling recital of tennis-balls loaded with "horritite" to remove the spell. A news story, based on explosives, will not again arouse interest or apprehension in the Empire State in many years to come. That field has been worked too barren by the pen-pushers of the past.

Some readers are curiously credulous as to all animal narratives. Many were interested two winters ago to read that rabbits could best be hunted with mirrors. Hang the mirrors on bushes, and while Bunny is egotistically pausing to admire himself, hypnotized, in fact, steal up and pot him. To-day you will find sportsmen who will swear that a rabbit will forego a life-saving sprint to gaze at his own reflection. One rabbit story suggests another, and the next pencil-shover decided that a rabbit's ears grafted on a cat would enable puss to catch unsophisticated mice by the yard. The soft insinuation stole into the homes like burglars, and many efforts were made, many letters were exchanged between cat clubs, in an endeavor to obtain a feline with fear-dispelling ears.

The Frog Orchestra

ONCE the style was set, the magazines were aiding and abetting the impetus by endowing quadrupeds with every human prerogative, except that of contesting elections, one bold spirit solemnly announcing that frogs could be taught to blend their tom-tom, boom-boom, toom-toom, into one harmonious whole. It was asserted that Mr. Frog's musical fiber could be cultivated to a degree where the rendition of church music and popular airs, of a slow, heavy swing, would be simply kindergarten. After a handful of alleged scientific data, detail was delved into, and the man's name, who had taught frogs in a neighboring swamp to accompany a fiddle, was given. As the marsh was no myth, nearly every inhabitant thereof was captured and carried away within a month. And one man, learned in frog lore, while passionately protesting that his specialty could never be taught choral stunts, admitted it was possible to evolve a soloist.

As discussion on this point was waxing rife, and the rural population was quietly slyly out to the bog to catch the semblance of a tune, the members of the grange paused in some doubt, but wholly interested, to read of an antifrigidity pill, capable of making hens entirely impervious to winter's zero blasts. This pill in some way agitated the oxygen in every gallinaceous patient until the bird would swelter on an icy hummock on the north and shady side of the barn and perspire while cattle froze to death in sheltered stalls. The only danger, confessed the writer, was in the summer-time, when the layers would need the friendly chill of a cold-storage plant in order to survive. The inventor

of the pills was allowed four initials, and the solid array found a great many followers for the inventor of this wonderful story.

Dodging from the ridiculous to the improbably possible, the intelligence that a cow in a Western New York town had swallowed an 1804 silver dollar boosted the price of bovine stock to a radical degree. Experts in numismatics were hugely aroused. The item explained how the valuable animal, now worth about one thousand dollars, in chewing up her owner's vest, had incidentally absorbed the precious coin. As the narrative promised to cause needless expense and many journeyings to the quiet hamlet, it was decided to modify the effect by changing the date of the dollar.

Returning to the supernally idiotic, an account of how timid barn-yard fowls, innoculated with the virus of a Colorado wolf, would pester the life out of the most audacious game-cock in existence, caused a great deal of comment and speculation. The cowardly biddies, it seems, were given this treatment as an insurance against the gamy spurs of their warrior companions. As a result a young drab of a chicken, properly loaded, would all but whip a horse. While many discounted the yarn, they realized that the introduction of wolf corpuscles into timid veins must have some radical effect.

Many Wanted Gamy Hens

A DOCTOR in Colorado, well-known to the farming community involved, wrote to the hoax-smith that he had received ten requests for wolf virus. He suggested that the first story be killed for the common good of the hen. But the writer backed down gracefully and was magnificent in his retreat. He told how the wolf virus turned hens into demons and left them inhabited by not one single homely, good-natured impulse. Just a disagreeable desire to pile up homicide charges could find a resting-place in their envenomed breasts. To weaken this unwholesome tendency, he said, the first experimenter had been forced to inoculate all his feathery Mr. Hydes with lamb's blood. And dear, dear! of course the wolf corpuscles at once scampered in pursuit of the sly lamb corpuscles, and as the latter retreated to the head of the container as the last refuge, the virus followed and the birds died of congestion of the brain.

And who could resist believing the carefully written account of "Muzzled Monkeys Picking Prunes"?

In palming off eccentric litigations, the hard-pressed Jules Verne of to-day finds a fertile field. In course of a Bryan campaign a story was sprung in a New York paper to the effect that a ruralite was suing a neighbor for throwing Roosevelt's picture on his barn at night by means of a magic lantern. Heavy damages were demanded, the plaintiff alleging that he was a Bryan man and had suffered great mental anguish at repeatedly beholding the second on the rival ticket peering from the side of the barn each night. The story was unusually well received in the West, and illustrations of the barn involved, as well as portraits of the principals, were not wanting. Lawyers were invited to write symposiums as to man's equity in light and air, and whether or not the colored rays constituted a trespass. Many a learned lunge and riposte was indulged in. By degrees the case came to trial, when the dreamer, either apprehensive or weary, nonsuited it.

A Strenuous Hug

ANOTHER mythical litigation, which had an immense vogue throughout this country and Canada one and a half years ago, was the damage action of William Lorraine of Buffalo against Miss Maria Du Calm of Niagara Falls. The plaintiff was represented as suing for two thousand dollars' damages, alleging that the defendant had fractured several of his ribs. The answer to this complaint furnished the nub of the yarn; for Miss Du Calm contended that the alleged assault occurred when she and he were developing negatives under the